

“Film Offers One-Sided View of Education Issues” by Olivia Pollak

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I arranged to go see the movie on a Sunday at 1 p.m. — an off-peak movie time — hoping an emptier theater would help me process the film. I knew *Waiting for Superman*, a documentary about failing public schools in America, was controversial. It had provoked a slew of editorials in newspapers across the country, newsletters from the San Francisco Unified School District teachers’ union and interviews with the director, Davis Guggenheim, who also directed *An Inconvenient Truth*. A fan of documentaries, I was hoping to be enlightened by a balanced portrayal of the public school system. Instead, I was disappointed by the black-and-white portrayal of our nation’s school systems, both district and charter.

Waiting for Superman follows five American children from different areas of the country, including New York City and Palo Alto, as their families, dissatisfied with their child’s present school, search for a better option. The movie has several very clear messages, among them: the failure of American public schools, the substandard quality of public school teachers and the impediment posed by teachers’ unions. The movie presents charter schools as the one and only solution to the “education crisis.”

Although documentaries often have an editorial slant, they usually acknowledge the other side of the story. In my mind, movies that do so come across as more credible. Their message is strengthened if they demonstrate a solid understanding of the counter-argument. *Waiting for Superman* not only did not explore other educational options, but it failed even to acknowledge them.

First and foremost, not all public schools in America are failing — take Lowell for example. The film’s biggest weakness was its failure to highlight the many thriving public schools in America. One of the best ways to improve something is to examine what works. This brings up another important point: what makes schools like Lowell “successful?” Is it the kids, the teachers, the parents? Is there a correlation between the wealth of a neighborhood and the quality of a school? Are the more “successful” schools those with selective admission? Although these questions are difficult to answer, they are important to explore, but *Waiting for Superman* ignores them.

Instead of embracing the complexity and ambiguity of public school improvement, the film presented charter schools as the clear solution. Charter schools can create their own curriculum, set their own standards and hire teachers who do not have union rights. They often serve a smaller population. Because of these differences, charter schools are exempt from some of the standardized requirements for which public schools are criticized in the film.

In reality, charter schools have more advantages than those addressed by the film. Most charter schools receive private funding, which gives them a monetary boost over non-charter public schools. Although on the rise, charter schools are few, with approximately 3,500 schools in 40 states, according to the organization U.S. Charter Schools on their Web site (www.uscharterschools.org). This makes admission competitive, thus limiting the number of students, and often the type of students, they choose to serve. According to Dana Goldstein in a Sept. 23 article in *The Nation*, four out of five charter schools are no better than the average public school. In addition, a study conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University revealed that while 17 percent of charter school students perform better on tests than students in traditional public schools, 37 percent performed significantly worse. *Waiting for Superman* failed to reference any such statistics; worse, it only showed a few of the top charter schools, implying that they are the defining schools of this movement that questions our democratic principle of all-inclusive public education.

Although the film made a justified attempt to simplify the admittedly mind-boggling public school debate, it ended up only complicating the issue by not addressing the full story. The film criticizes teachers’ unions for making it difficult to fire teachers because of tenure and argues that union contracts prevent bad teachers from being fired. In reality, many unions, such as the San Francisco United Educators, have the Peer Assistance and Review Program whereby teacher-coaches and school administrators work with under performing tenured teachers to assess their teaching, support their improvement efforts, but also, if necessary, fire them.

The film also states that Finland has the best public education system, but a full story would include an analysis of other influential factors on Finnish education. Not only did it fail to recognize that Finland has a small, homogeneous population, but it did not mention that, despite their success, Finland has a strong teachers' union. According to the Trade Union of Education in Finland, more than 95 percent of Finnish teachers are unionized; this fact contradicts the scapegoat the film makes of teachers' unions.

Perhaps it is too hard to try to simplify the issue of public education while still addressing the full story; although somewhat understandable, that is unacceptable. Ambiguity provokes inquiry and questioning. Questioning leads to more thorough analysis and opens up the stage for input from everyone, even the — gasp! — public school teachers themselves, very few of whom were interviewed in the film.

Even though it was too absolute in its portrayal of the public school crisis and its single solution, I commend the film for provoking public discussion. A recent cover of New York Magazine asked, "Can One Little Movie Save America's Schools?" and newspapers like the San Francisco Chronicle and New York Times have featured editorials on the issue.

This controversial film has provoked responses from various stakeholders in the public school debate, thus demonstrating just how heated the issue is. Guggenheim has been interviewed by various media moguls, including Oprah Winfrey on her show on Sept. 20, an interview which itself was controversial. Annie Delgado, a teacher at Buhach Colony High School in Atwater, California, was frustrated by the imbalanced representation of opinions on the show. "I was outraged by the manner in which Ms. Winfrey characterized the decline of public education as being the result of poor teaching and unions," Delgado said, as reported by Sherry Posnick-Goodwin in the Oct. 2010 issue of California Educator.

We have a tendency to seek simple solutions, but sometimes the best way to solve a problem is by accepting its complexity. In doing so, the best documentaries overcome the impulse to jump to easy answers, which can be read as superficial conclusions or quick-fix solutions that don't fix anything. Hard problems demand the most thought and usually produce the most thorough solutions, solutions that can rebuild public education. We are awaiting that documentary.